Chaucer's Pardoner in Performance

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I

People normally refer to Chaucer as if he were a book—"I've been reading Chaucer", or "I've bought a new Chaucer". The speaker has in mind a closely printed, many-paged, very bookish book. And even when language imputes human agency to this "Chaucer", as in "Chaucer says" or "Chaucer thinks", the agent is still implicitly the author of a book to be pored over. Critics write fondly of Chaucer's irony, his ambiguities, his manipulation of sources, his taste for subtle contrasts and repetitions across many pages. The literary interpretation and evaluation of Chaucer rest in general on the assumption that he is literary, producing a book—even a novel.

That assumption is in general false, if you think of Chaucer's work as produced in its period. In the fourteenth century the essential existence of a poem was in its oral performance, more like dramatic than literary production. The place of the manuscript was no more than that held today by a tape or a record lying on a shelf. Manuscripts required a skilled performer to activate them, just as we now need a skilled machine to read our recordings. There was certainly a late medieval increase in private reading and also in silent reading—they were by no means the same thing when most people at least mumbled as they read. But the basic literary mode remained that of performance.

I want to consider some implications of accepting performance as the mode basic to *The Canterbury Tales*—and accepting that Chaucer wrote them as scripts for his own performance, as monologues. It is possible to take a "close reading" approach and argue in detail for the orally persuasive character of Chaucer's poetry; I have attempted to do that before now on several occasions.[1] Here, though, I will discuss a more varied and more far-reaching set of patterns arising from the premise of performance.

I should say that although some of these points move some distance away from the detailed surface of the performed text, even become theoretical, in a social and historical way, it is

1 See S. Knight, *Rymyng Craftily: Meaning in Chaucer's Poetry*, Sydney, 1973 and *The Poetry of The Canterbury Tales*, Sydney, 1974.

through performing the text itself as a monologue that I have come to perceive many of these wider-reaching patterns. For example, a few years ago I was taping The Nun's Priest's Tale and it became necessary to break the performance, as it would not fit on one side of the tape. I found that Chaucer had done the work already, since his poems tend to fall crisply into segments of about fifteen to twenty minutes—just about the limit of even a fascinated listener's concentration. A different perception came out of another actual performance. I was asked later to tape The Wife of Bath's Tale. My first instinct was to say no, it should be done by a woman. But then I wondered, and read through the prologue and tale again with this in mind. It is evident that part of their meaning—their ideology, perhaps more accurately—is that the vigorous wife's monologue is actually performed by a containing male narrator. The wife is never set free in her own voice from masculine control—just as Rosalind, Viola and most of Shakespeare's vigorous independent women spend almost the whole play dressed up as men.[2]

II

The premise of performance brings many insights, ranging like those two from technical to thematic. The text itself comes under a new sort of scrutiny when you read it aloud. For example, lines 708–10:

> And many a grisly ooth thanne han they sworn,
> And Cristes blessed body al torente—
> Deeth shal be deed, if that they may hym hente![3]

Is "Deeth shal be deed" part of a line-long ironic comment by the narrator—or is it actually one of the rioters' oaths? Robinson and other editions leave it unclear, and the manuscripts make things no clearer. The line performs more convincingly, in my view, if "Deeth shal be deed" is a grisly oath within the performance, then the monologuist switches to a dry comment.

On other occasions the normal punctuation seems quite wrong.

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2   See the discussion of this in Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, London, 1970, pp. 207–10.
3   The text used here is that in F. N. Robinson's *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, second edition, Boston, 1957 (later republished by Oxford University Press). This is based on the Ellesmere manuscript, now thought to be slightly inferior to the Hengwrt manuscript, which has so far only been edited by N. F. Blake, *The Canterbury Tales,* London, 1980.

In lines 444–7, for example, the pattern set by Skeat and Robinson is:

> I wol nat do no labour with myne handes,
> Ne make baskettes, and lyve therby,
> By cause I wol noon of the apostles countrefete;
> I woll have moneie, wolle, chese and whete . . .

This reads much more fluently and makes better sense if you place the full stop after "therby" in line 445. The same sort of thing comes up at lines 344–7:

> And in Latyn I speke a wordes fewe,
> To saffron with my predicacioun,
> And for to stire hem to devocioun.
> Thanne shewe I forth my longe cristal stones . . .

If you end the sentence at "predicacioun" in 345, and remove the full stop after "devocioun" in 346, the flow of verse and logic is much improved.

These problems arise because the manuscripts are essentially scripts for performance. Many have no punctuation at all, and those that do, usually the most careful and accurate ones, merely use the virgule, a pause to show where you breathe—a sort of universal comma. Even that beautiful book, the Ellesmere manuscript, used as a base in our modern texts, only has this performer's punctuation.[4] Modern editors, as a result, have to decide where their full stops and colons and semi-colons will go. Often it is hard to decide, and many distinctly literary interpretations —or misinterpretations—have been made.

Something else happens when modern syntactic punctuation is laid on to a text composed and punctuated for oral performance. The nature of ambiguity and irony changes as a result. Critics like to write about ambiguity: what they mean is a word or phrase which can have more than one meaning if you ponder it carefully, fumble back and forward through the text for other occurrences. This approach itself is often used to solve problems of interpretation. When the pardoner finally recommends Christ's pardon to the pilgrims he says "For that is best; I wol yow nat deceyve" (918). Critics have fretted whether this statement, coming from him, is a moment of truth-telling self-revulsion, or a final twist of the slippery trickster. It is common to slide off

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4 The punctuation of the two best manuscripts can be seen in *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. P. G. Ruggiers, Norman, 1979. This gives a facsimile and a transcript of the Hengwrt manuscript and records where its usage differs from Ellesmere.

this hook by appealing to Chaucer's irony and ambiguity. He can be said to mean both. But critics can only elude the issue in that way if they read the text silently. Read aloud, must be *either* honest or sneering. The former, in my opinion, for reasons that will emerge later.

In performance most of the points that critics favour as ambiguities cannot be in the least ambiguous: the performer must solve the crux in one way or another. But ambiguity-lovers should not despair: performance has its own types of enigma, normally ignored in silent reading. Performance can create ambiguity through the onward movement of the language by making two kinds of syntactic and semantic analysis possible. This practice has gone almost unnoticed, but here are a few examples. At 779–81 the "worst" of the three rioters speaks more grimly than he realizes:

> This tresor hath Fortune unto us yiven,
> In myrthe and joliftee oure lyf to lyven,
> And lightly as it comth, so wol we spende.

He is in the last line still thinking about the treasure, and bookish reading easily passes over the intervening lines as parenthetic. But in performance the impact of "lyf" is stronger: it has sneaked in before "it" in 781 and sounds like its referent, as if "lyf" is the thing which comes as easily, and which they will spend as easily, as the money—this is both oral and dramatic irony.

A different sort of ambiguity is achieved when the pardoner so proudly describes himself in lines 398–401. The oral possibilities cut across the actual syntax and go further than he yet will state:

> Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne
> That it is joye to se my bisynesse.
> Of avarice and of swich cursednesse
> Is al my prechyng . . .

The oral suggestion cuts across the literary full stop. The suggestion of "bisyness of avarice" is absolutely correct, as the pardoner will soon admit. But that reality is subliminally created before it is confessed. Chaucer was fond of this sort of device, one of the subtler ways of creating complex meaning during performance.

III

To speak more generally about performance, it is evident that by creating a character like this pardoner, a first-rate verbal

manipulator, Chaucer has given himself a great opportunity to write a stunning piece of monologue theatre. And he takes up his own challenge. Early in the pardoner's prologue, the pardoner slides into direct speech to his imaginary audience (lines 352–88). His professional performance is recreated briefly in a muted forerunner to the tale itself.

As soon as the tale begins, the world is that of grand performance, as anyone knows who reads it aloud in Middle English. The first nine lines are a single sequence, and demand to be read in a single breath—a good test of a performer's competence:

> In Flaundres whilom was a compaignye
> Of yonge folk that haunteden folye,
> As riot, hasard, stywes and tavernes,
> Where as with harpes, lutes and gyternes,
> They daunce and pleyen at dees both day and nyght,
> And eten also and drynken over hir myght,
> Thurgh which they doon the devel sacrifise
> Withinne that develes temple, in cursed wise,
> By superfluytee abhomynable. (463–71)

The straining melodrama of the last three lines is strikingly enacted by the strain which the passage finally places on the speaker's voice and breath control.

The opening part of the tale which follows, a preacher haranguing his audience, is a classic softening-up exercise, stimulating the audience with the exciting and sensational, drawing their attention and emotion into the speaker's hands. Nowadays educated people are so familiar with sophisticated language that they have forgotten or never knew the sheer impact of confident word-handling upon people without those skills. The quacks and mountebanks of the past world, and the talk-back and quiz-show princes of the present, know that impact well. The pardoner exploits classically the rich impact of word-juggling upon the tongue-tied. It is a performance *par excellence*, and it is best perceived as such through performance. Here are lines 505–48, the development of the harangue against gluttony:

> 505 Adam oure fader, and his wyf also,
> From Paradys to labour and to wo
> Were dryven for that vice, it is no drede.
> For whil that Adam fasted, as I rede,
> He was in Paradys; and when that he
> 510 Eet of the fruyt deffended on the tree,
> Anon he was out cast to wo and peyne.
> O glotonye, on thee wel oghte us pleyne!
> O, wiste a man how manye maladyes
> Folwen of excesse and of glotonyes,

515　He wolde been the more mesurable
　　　Of his diete, sittynge at his table.
　　　Allas! the shorte throte, the tendre mouth,
　　　Maketh that est and west and north and south,
　　　In erthe, in eir, in water, men to swynke
520　To gete a glotoun deyntee mete and drynke!
　　　Of this matiere, O Paul, wel kanstow trete:
　　　'Mete unto wombe, and wombe eek unto mete,
　　　Shal God destroyen bothe,' as Paulus seith.
　　　Allas! a foul thyng is it, by my feith,
525　To seye this word, and fouler is the dede,
　　　What man so drynketh of the white and rede
　　　That of his throte he maketh his pryvee,
　　　Thurgh thilke cursed superfluitee.
　　　The apostel wepyng seith ful pitously,
　　　'Ther walken manye of which yow toold have I—
　　　I seye it now wepyng, with pitous voys—
　　　That they been enemys of Cristes croys,
　　　Of whiche the ende is deeth, wombe is hir god!'
　　　O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod,
535　Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun!
　　　At either end of thee foul is the soun.
　　　How greet labour and cost is thee to fynde!
　　　Thise cookes, how they stampe, and streyne, and grynde,
　　　And turnen substaunce into accident,
540　To fulfille al thy likerous talent!
　　　Out of the harde bones knokke they
　　　The mary, for they caste noght awey
　　　That may go thrugh the golet softe and swoote.
　　　Of spicerie of leef, and bark, and roote
545　Shal been his sauce ymaked by delit,
　　　To make hym yet a newer appetit.
　　　But certes, he that haunteth swiche delices
　　　Is deed, whil that he lyveth in thos vices.

The passage builds up brilliantly. At first a simple narrative *exemplum* about Adam with a stern ending, 505–11. Then a fairly standard and calm *exclamatio*, 512–16. Then a much more strongly stressed and sensual *exclamatio*, 517–20.[5] The temperature is rising; it is briefly checked by a cool biblical *auctoritas*, 521–3, and then the climax lets rip with another and more grotesque *exclamatio*, 524–8, which flows over into a deeply emotive biblical *auctoritas* spiced strongly with the narrator's crocodile tears, 518–33. The audience, no doubt thoroughly softened up by this performance, then hears a deeply sensual evocation of gluttony. It is at first disgusting, then increasingly

5　Rhetorical figures are described and exemplified in the appendix to
　　Rymyng Craftily (see note 1).

intriguing, and finally, because of the consonant organization, even salivating. The pardoner draws his audience into feeling with and for the "delices" of this sin—and then briefly cuts them off in 548 by saying they are indeed "vices".

The passage is a great delight to hear—and to perform. An element not to be forgotten. Does the sheer power and memorability of the performance have its own evaluative force and outweigh the morally correct but artistically perfunctory ending? That pattern is repeated in the large structure of the second part of the tale, which within the correct framework of rejecting cupidity paints an enthralling picture of a mound of gold. But for the pardoner's own greedy purposes, the rejection of the fatal money is just as vivid as the delight of money; the previous harangue made the sins of gluttony, gambling and swearing much more prominent than their rejection, especially in the word-flow of performance.

IV

The pardoner's exemplary story of the three rioters, gold and death, has often been praised for its energy, its sharply jointed plot, its awe-inspiring and purse-loosening impact. Those points need no repeating. Nor do the scholarly explanations that the tale acts as an exemplum in the structure of the pardoner's sermon, and there is no medieval reason to feel that the opening harangue is too long and the "story" too short.[6]

Two points do need stressing, however, in the context of performance. The first is that modern people are so used to vivid narrative, both in the novel and the film tradition, that they probably miss the force of imaginative realization in this tale. In the middle ages the word "imagination" had a distinctly visual implication—making an image. "He made a mirror of his mind" is a common way of saying he imagined things. Here as elsewhere Chaucer is writing very visually, and he will have relied on his audience, as they heard him, to have created in the mirrors

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6   R. W. V. Elliott discusses the tale as a sermon briefly in "The Pardoner's Sermon and Its Exemplum", republished in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Pardoner's Tale,* ed. D. R. Faulkner, Englewood Cliffs, 1973, pp. 23–32; A. C. Spearing says a little more in his edition of *The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale,* Cambridge, 1965, pp. 23–6; fuller recent discussions are referred to by D. A. Lawton in "The Pardoner's Tale: Morality and its Content", in *Studies in Chaucer,* Sydney, 1981, p. 61, note 11.

of their minds something like a film of the action. Just as the harangue touches a soft spot in people untrained in verbal skills, so the tale appeals directly to an audience largely starved of visual stimuli—and so skilled in compensating for their absence.[7] For just that reason the church traditionally used the visual medium, in windows, wall-paintings, statues and tapestries. The performance of The Pardoner's Tale is rich in both the verbal play and the visual delights common to ancient oral material.

The second point is that primary among these visually sensual delights are the gold coins. They are "floryns fine of gold ycoyned rounde" (770), and the words "gold" and "tresor" keep recurring. The pardoner provides half of Chaucer's entire use of coin names—floryns, grotes, pence, nobles, sterlyngs.[8] He cherishes the name as he visualizes the things. All three rioters relish deeply "The beautee of thise floryns newe and brighte" (839). The beautiful coins that are death itself imaginatively dominate the story of the three rioters in its performance. This fact is more than merely striking or merely effective for the pardoner's profit. To locate and explain the force of the coins in the performance, it is necessary to discuss the pardoner and his tale in a wider context, both social and economic. I will approach this material through some of the sources Chaucer used.

A connection is often made between the pardoner and Faux Semblant, a character in the Roman de la Rose. He confesses his own falsity, and there certainly are links with the pardoner. But the implications of the source go beyond mere literary borrowing. The notion of a speaker who both confesses and performs his villainy is familiar enough in medieval literature.[9] The medieval stage is one source of villainous confessions and behaviour, both in the biblical cycle plays with characters like

7   See many of the entries under "mirror" and "imagination" in A Concordance to the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. J. S. P. Tatlock and A. G. Kennedy, Washington, 1927, and also see the discussion by V. A. Kolve, "Chaucer and the Visual Arts" in Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. D. S. Brewer, Writers and their Backgrounds, London, 1974, especially pp. 298–306.
8   See the entries under various coin names in A Concordance to the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (see note 7).
9   The bare facts of the Pardoner/Faux Semblant relationship are published by G. Dempster in "The Pardoner's Prologue", in W. F. Bryan and G. Dempster, eds., Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, Chicago, 1941, pp. 409–14, and D. S. Fansler, Chaucer and the Roman de la Rose, New York, 1914, pp. 162–6.

Cain and Herod, and in the moral allegory plays where figures like Bad Angel and the seven sins present themselves and their meanings consciously and directly. Chaucer's debt here to dramatic performance is plain, but need not be direct; the performance tradition was very well established in literary texts like Langland's *Piers Plowman,* circulating widely in the late fourteenth century.

The important point is that to associate the pardoner with this tradition implies something about him as a character that has not always been recognized or welcomed, especially by the more literary of Chaucer's critics. These dramatic figures, whether they are named or allegorical, are basically *typical.* Cain is the archetypal murderer, Herod the quintessential tyrant. There is a collective entity to these figures, which is quite different from the common modern treatment of Chaucer's pardoner, and his other characters, as if they are essentially individuals.

A very influential force in that critical trend was G. L. Kittredge. He judged that the pardoner was "the one lost soul" on the Canterbury pilgrimage, that he was so deeply moved by his own words that he broke down at the end into truth—only to be rejected by the host, punished for an evil he no longer believed in.[10]

This individualized, all-too-human pardoner is to a large degree the creation of modern critics, reworking Chaucer from the standpoint of readers of the bourgeois humanist novel. They even name him in that tradition. Note that they (and, so far, I) call him *the* pardoner. Is that what Chaucer calls him? Only twice, and then when the definite article carries no stress at all (line 965 in his own tale and line 163 in the wife of Bath's prologue). He is normally "a" pardoner, or when definition is required,

10 Kittredge's account of the pardoner is in *Chaucer and his Poetry,* Cambridge, Mass., 1915, pp. 211–18. This has been republished in E. Wagenknecht, ed., *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism,* New York, 1959, pp. 117–25. Other classic sources of the "humanist" reading of the pardoner are G. G. Sedgewick's synoptic account, "The Progress of Chaucer's Pardoner 1880–1940", also republished in Wagenknecht's *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism,* pp. 126–58. A well known and semi-Leavisite mutation of this is visible in J. Speirs, "The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale" in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature,* Vol. I, *Medieval Literature,* Part 1, "Chaucer and the Alliterative Tradition", ed. B. Ford, second edition, Harmondsworth, 1982, pp. 154–62, and a fuller version of the same approach is to be found in T. Whittock, *A Reading of The Canterbury Tales,* Cambridge, 1968, pp. 158–94.

"this" pardoner—that is, "this" particular example of the par-
doner category. Chaucer's scribes understood he was one of
a kind, not a unique individual.

In the general prologue it is customary for manuscripts to
have marginal headings (called rubrics) which note where a pil-
grim's description begins. I have never seen one that uses the
definite article; they are either without any article—"knight",
"miller", "pardoner" or, equally often, indefinite in their indi-
cation—"a knight", "a miller", "a pardoner". There is a lot of
difference between those forms and our confidently individuating
"the". And although the manuscripts in general do, like modern
texts, use a capital letter for each pilgrim this does not, as we
might think, make it like an individuating personal name. All
important nouns are generally capitalized, notably those of social
roles, whether they are pilgrims or not. King, Magician, Herald
are honoured in the same way, because like the pilgrims they
are social types or "estates".[11]

The pardoner-as-humanist-character school of criticism is re-
creating Chaucer's text in terms of its bookish (and bourgeois)
cultural tradition; a similar pattern exists in the other major
modern interpretative strategy with the pardoner, namely Christian
allegory. Relying on scholarly learning and techniques redolent
more of the American Ph.D. schools than the medieval writer's
attitudes, these writers "prove" that the incidents and statements
in the prologue and tale are part of the ever-rolling tide of Christ-
ian cultural propaganda.[12] This technique has been criticized as
inappropriate;[13] what has not been observed is that it is a different
type of bookishness, resting on that ultimate book, the bible,
and on the extraordinarily detailed commentaries erected upon
it by Catholic scholars from the fourth century onwards. Where
the novelistic approach dissolved social types into individualist
responses, the Christian allegorists dissolve them into timeless
moral absolutes. Two equally consoling ways of ignoring the

11 For a discussion of "estates" see Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval
    Estates Satire*, Cambridge, 1973, especially Chapter 1, "Introduction".
12 A classic example of this treatment is R. P. Miller's "Chaucer's Par-
    doner: the Scriptural Eunuch and the Pardoner's Tale", republished in
    Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Pardoner's Tale (see note 6),
    pp. 43–69. A less extreme version is in P. G. Ruggiers, *The Art of
    The Canterbury Tales,* Madison, 1965, pp. 121–30.
13 See E. T. Donaldson, "Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval
    Literature: The Opposition", republished in *Speaking of Chaucer*, Lon-
    don, 1970, pp. 134–53.

collective patterns of social man and woman.

So bearing in mind the fact that the performance in this tale is that of a typical pardoner, not an individualist construct nor a religious symbol, it is time to develop this point by turning back to Faux Semblant and the implications of a false exterior. (Often translated as "False Seeming", Faux Semblant is better represented as "False Appearance" or "Bogus Exterior".) Many of the pardoner's traits, especially those in the general prologue, come from this source. It seems to modern readers a satisfying connection. If you follow the usual modern course and conceive of the pardoner as an individual, then you can easily talk or write in a facile way about his assumption of a bogus role as preacher in order to make a lot of money for his real acquisitive self.

Well, this pardoner does do that, but it is a much more disruptive thing to do in terms of medieval ideas of character and values than it is in our terms. False exterior, real interior, that is a pattern which ratifies a dominant modern concept of the personality, seeing it as an inner and private construct forced to take on various social roles. The Freudian conflict between id and superego implies that, and is widely accepted. The word "role" implies falsehood today, so this pardoner's actions may seem sinful, but they are not cognitively dissonant, to those who share the normal bourgeois ontology, the view of the nature and the status of the individual that dominates what is called Western society.

But in medieval terms the false exterior, real interior model *is* cognitively dissonant. Medieval dominant ontology is the exact reverse of the modern Western idea—as is the ontology still prevailing in many parts of the world, from the communist states to Aboriginal Australia. This view sees single people as essentially fragments of a social whole. The individual who acts alone for private reasons is not admirable but dysfunctional, and must either be brought back into line like a hero of medieval adventure or, like the hero and heroine of love tragedies, die in social isolation. To fill a role is not to be false to yourself, but to act correctly in terms of social duty.

From that premise, that people are essentially communal, there flows a large set of things which tend to be the reverse of the individualism-based features of bourgeois art. Values have a public character: honour is a central value, publicly accorded, and shame is a feared negative sanction. Public knowledge

is authoritative, ranging from acknowledged past authorities, through proverbs to displayed behaviour. Authors are not original literary heroes, but humble functionaries of public idea-mediation. Literary language is not individuated: characters do not speak in dialect or with unique tendencies: they adopt a register and rhetoric suitable to their category—unless they are socially dysfunctional. Impersonal linguistic constructions are very common; description is by acknowledged patterns, or cliché as we might say. In very many detailed ways the medieval text bespeaks the public nature of knowledge, values and personality in the period.

The character Faux Semblant, then, is not simply False Appearance/Bogus Exterior and as such a guide to the inherent falseness of external and public display, as modern people might think. Faux Semblant is a threat to a whole system of externalized knowledge and a public concept of being. So this pardoner is a deeply shocking figure. His dissent is made dynamically successful by his very mastery of the public patterns of rhetoric and performance. He is a truly dialectical figure in that the contemporary vigour of one system—external values—is the cause of its overthrow.

<p style="text-align:center">V</p>

The private way in which this pardoner uses his public skills is stressed by Chaucer.[14] He makes him specifically rule out the only communally-oriented rationalization the period could offer for such behaviour, namely that he was actually a devil. Devils were fated to act in the public good by testing people, in spite of a diabolic wish to disrupt the common good—the notion is spelt out in The Friar's Tale (1480–1500). Although the pardoner knows his sermon can do good (427–33), he does not care: it is only his inner concerns he tends. He is a self-conscious, anti-communal, individualist revolutionary. This explains why he speaks frankly about the relative values of his pardon and Christ's—and why he still maintains his consciously aberrant, privately motivated public role.

In this he is, like all individualists, a member of an identifiable category with similar interests. Chaucer and other late medieval

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14 The pardoner's private position has been discussed, in a rather asocial and idealistic context, by David Aers in *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*, London, 1980, pp. 89–106.

writers were intrigued by the possibility of individual action and values, and the dissenter from the public interest is a common figure in the contemporary literature. *The House of Fame* is Chaucer's theoretical study of the matter. Geoffrey the narrator, who can read silently and ignores his neighbours, sees how the trumpets of fame blow honour and shame for the world at large, but feels, if doubtfully, "I wot myself best how I stonde" (1878). Elsewhere Chaucer juxtaposes the public and the private realm, in the persons of the Knight and the Miller, in the conflict of the birds in the Parlement of Foules, in the problems faced by Troilus and Criseyde. Other writers in the period worked along this interface of public and private: the stunning Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is centrally concerned with communal and internal values at odds with each other, and that becomes a major issue in the tragic climax of Malory's massive story of King Arthur and the knights of the round table.

The source of this conflict, this pressure against what I have described as the dominant model of being, knowing and judging, is the fact that dominance is always the result of a conflict. Patterns of thought, like the social patterns that generate them, are never static, but are always the statement, or even the means of resolution, of conflict (albeit a temporary or fleeting resolution). It is clear that in the medieval world what we call the social and what we call the individual were in complex tension. Feudalism was a particularly remarkable balancing act of public honour and private property.[15] The crucial point is that medieval people saw this tension from the position that the communality was authentic, the individual was dysfunctional. The pattern of so-called Western culture is to take the reverse view, to see the individual as beset by social pressures.

Although there had been tension between society as a communality and its constituent members throughout the medieval period, clearly realized in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century romance, it is nevertheless evident that in England in the late fourteenth century it becomes a more widely recognized and pressing problem. Chaucer in particular is one of the writers who explores this conflict. His Canterbury pilgrimage itself is a model of a world allegedly united, allegedly a coherent band with a single Christian goal, yet exhibiting all sorts of privately derived conflict and difference. The pardoner's performance is a par-

15 See the discussion of feudalism in W. Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages,* Baltimore, 1965.

ticularly acute realization of this tension, and to grasp the implications of his disturbing performance it is necessary to see the relation to political and economic affairs of this increasing late medieval notion that the public *semblance* may be *false*.

There were clear signs in late fourteenth-century England that traditional forces of communal coherence were rapidly weakening. The church was under attack, partly from satirists like Chaucer and Langland but more seriously, in the church's own eyes, from insiders like Wycliff who were challenging the authority of the traditional Christian organization to mediate religion for the individual Christian. The sanctified priest and the Latin bible were the points at which a pressure was applied that was inherently individualist. The idea of stripping the church of its property was a more materially anti-communal suggestion.

The state was under similar pressure, and many at the time thought the two kinds of dissent were related.[16] The peasants' revolt in 1381 was only the most serious of a whole set of political disturbances. It is essentially misnamed, because the central revolutionaries were *former* peasants, led by urban craftsmen and alienated churchmen. They were seeking a new political set-up, outside the traditional communality, where manorial lords held peasants in bondage with support from the cultural authority given by the law and the church. There was no developed theory of individual freedom in the revolt, but one slogan was the egalitarian jingle "When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman". And the socio-economic basis, the take-off position for the revolt, was the fact that after the Black Death of 1348–9 labour was scarce and increasingly had to be hired for money in a personalized and contractual way. A former peasantry was becoming a free labour force, and the remaining elements of a coercive communality were exposed to pressure.[17]

Chaucer's politics are rarely overt and rarely conscious. Yet like other great artists, his imagination transmutes the real forces and conflicts of his period into the patterns of fiction. The ultimate conservatism of Chaucer, like that of Langland, does not prevent them authentically realizing in mediated ways the force of the disturbances of their period. I have already discussed

16 See the essay by M. Aston, "Lollardy and Sedition, 1381–1431", republished in *Peasants, Knights and Heretics: Studies in Medieval English Social History*, ed. R. H. Hilton, Cambridge, 1976, pp. 273–318.

17 See R. H. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381*, London, 1973.

the inherently anti-communal individualism of the pardoner. His role as a figure in the contemporary criticism of the church is evident. But his publicly performed privacy goes further than this: Chaucer's imagination derives its power ultimately from the economic pattern that was at the basis of the rapidly developing social and cultural individualism, and of the peasants' revolt itself.

The manorial economy had been based on use value; things were produced primarily for local use, and any other specialist goods could be largely obtained by barter. Cash had long existed, but was used for exotic things like spice, or when in great surplus, for conspicuous display such as sumptuous clothes or building churches. While that display helped legitimize the power of the powerful, it was outside the economic system as such. Cash had no key or structural role in the economy.

But the break-up of the manorial pattern both created and was facilitated by the increasing use of cash. In late fourteenth-century England this development accelerated for a number of reasons—the shortage of labour, the supplies of bullion looted from the French wars, England's growing mercantile power internally and, especially, externally as an exporter of wool.[18]

Cash seemed a very strange thing for people who were not used to it, a weird force, both strangely seductive and fatefully destructive. In *Piers Plowman* Langland makes Lady Meed a potent symbol of this early cash-nexus, beautiful, insinuating, deadly. In The Pardoner's Tale Chaucer does the same thing through the pardoner's obsession with cash and its fatal beauty.

The power of the gold coins in the performance has already been discussed. Their imagined and imaged vigour is especially potent in the contemporary context, where coins had an actually and emotionally disruptive force like that of the silicon chip today. To see the meaning of money in the performance is to see the full range of Chaucer's imaginative power. He realizes the socio-economic history of his period in a figure whose disturbing dissent from social norms goes far beyond the simple skilful con-man that criticism has usually presented.

In fact the power of the realization is such that Chaucer has to *contain* the pardoner's fertile vigour, just because it was so

18 For the late medieval economy and its sociocultural relations see J. L. Bolton, *The English Medieval Economy, 1150–1500*, London, 1980; J. Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy, 1348–1530*, London, 1977; and *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, ed. R. H. Hilton, London, 1978.

historically real in the period and just because his art had res-
ponded so strongly to that force. But when self-knowledge is
itself a part of individualism, that has its own disturbing vigour.
The dominant piece of authorial ideology lies in the fact that
from the very beginning Chaucer insists that the pardoner has
no vigour, can have no progeny, his force is without historical
and human future, because he is himself infertile. The general
prologue harps on the pardoner's homosexuality in a way which
is almost sniggering and evidently neurotic. Not for anti-homo-
sexual reasons, but through more widely conservative fears of
what the pardoner represents. A fictional emasculation is the
way of drawing the pardoner's sting. The host finally makes
this area the ground for his rejection of the pardoner, he wants
to castrate him again, even after the general prologue's emascu-
lating innuendoes. He must be constantly castrated or he and
those like him will screw the system: the modern idiom matches
Chaucer's combination of sexist and social anxiety.

In fact the host is so brutish to the pardoner, you might well
wonder which side Chaucer is on. After all, he too could read
silently, thought he himself knew best where he stood, himself
worked in the mercantile world, did receive cash payments, was
actually something of an individualized hero-writer, did produce
the first dialect in English.

Chaucer's art and his attitudes certainly participate in the
rising force of socio-economically based individualism in the
period. The power of his realization of the pardoner seems to
outgrow its containing conservative frame, just as the vigour of
the wife of Bath seems to survive the various types of contain-
ment that close around her battling figure.

That appears to be why Chaucer finally retracted all these
tales, in a communal holocaust of his proto-individualist works.
In his "retracciouns" at the very end of the Canterbury Tales he
withdrew many of his tales, "thilke that sownen into synne".
There can be no doubt that from such a viewpoint The Pardoner's
Tale does "tend towards sin" in terms of its general impact.
And it does that so dangerously because it is such a stunning
performance, one which realizes the verbal, social and ultimately
political implications of public performance itself.